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SUBJECT: A FIRST LOOK AT GUINEA'S NEW ELECTORAL COMMISSION

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Guinea's new National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) was officially sworn in on December 6. The commission is expected to hold an initial meeting in the next few days in order to discuss the first order of business - election of a CENI internal governing bureau, which includes the president. There are at least two candidates for the president position and some debate about who may eventually get the position. A number of contacts indicate that Ben Sekou Syllah, a prominent civil society leader, is the natural choice, but others suggest that the decision may not be so straightforward. Comprising 25 members, most of whom are over the age of 55, the CENI includes only two female representatives and nearly half of its representatives are from the Malinke ethnic group. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

12. (U) President Conte's official appointment of 25 members to the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) on November 28 (reftel A) opens the door for Guinea to prepare for its delayed legislative elections, initially scheduled for June 2007 and then postponed until December 2007. In September, the Government of Guinea announced that it was halting all elections preparations until the CENI was officially in place (reftel B) noting that a credible CENI is critical to ensuring transparent legislative elections. Elections are now expected to be held sometime in 2008.

13. (U) Each of Guinea's previous elections were organized by the Ministry of Interior with the supervision of the national electoral commissions. However, these commissions were generally were not independent from the government. In response, the National Assembly passed a law in May 2007 providing for the creation of an independent electoral commission. According to this law, the commission is composed of 25 members: ten members from the majority political party and its allies, ten members from the political opposition parties, two members from the government administration (who have no voting authority), and three members from civil society. Members from political parties were internally selected from within the political parties while civil society members were selected by the National Council for Civil Society Organizations (CNOSC).

A LOOK AT WHO'S WHO

14. (SBU) Of the twenty-five members, two are women. Four members - one from the political majority, two from the opposition, and one from civil society - are under the age of 55. Across ethnicities, the group divides as follows: eleven Malinke, seven Peuhl, four Soussou, and three from Forest tribes. Many of the members have

previous government experience (either in elected or appointed positions) and/or are considered academics, although there are a few businessmen represented as well. At least three of the opposition party and one of the majority party commission members served on previous electoral commissions.

15. (SBU) Representing the government are Mr. Cheick Fantamady Conde (Malinke) and Mr. Abdoul Karim Bah (Peuhl/Soussou). Mr. Conde is the former general secretary of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and is currently a journalist for a private radio station, Familia FM. Conde is a current Ministry of Interior employee and has been there for a number of years. He is reportedly close to former Minister of Interior, Kiridi Bangoura. Previously, Mr. Bah served as prefect of Dubreka, which is President Conte's hometown - a position typically reserved for Conte's close supporters. In addition, Mr. Bah's father is the one who taught the Koran to President Conte and it was Mr. Bah that registered financial contributions for the President when his mother passed away some years ago. (Note - these two commission members will likely have some influence, but do not have voting authority).

16. (SBU) Heading up the civil society team of three members is Ben Sekou Syllah, President of the CNOSC. He is widely considered an influential leader from within civil society who was instrumental in the negotiations during the strikes in January/February 2007. He is also behind recent civil society efforts to redefine a national strategy for change (reftel C). He is considered close to the two other civil society members and may have supported their candidacy. Mr. Lounceny Camara is a union member who was also active during the January/February negotiations. Mr. Fode Abass Bangoura is reportedly a dynamic lawyer.

NEXT STEPS

CONAKRY 00001306 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) Now that there is a CENI to work with, the international community is eager to get things moving. During a regularly scheduled elections focal group meeting attended by poloff, the European Union, UNDP, and the Japanese Embassy on December 5, participants discussed next steps. Noting that the upcoming holidays will likely impede progress during the month of December, the EU representative said that the voter registration test kits, which will be used to revise Guinea's electoral list, are scheduled to arrive in Conakry no later than January 2 by air. Given some flexibility in timing to allow for customs clearance, the EU representative was optimistic that the teams could begin testing the equipment as early as January 7. (Note - testing teams visited Conakry in October, but the Guinean Government did not permit them to conduct the tests due to the lack of a CENI).

18. (SBU) The CENI's first task will be to elect an internal governing bureau, which typically includes a President, two vice-presidents, and a treasurer. The UNDP representative said that the CENI plans to meet no later than December 10 and that the commission's leadership will likely be decided then. Contacts report that there are at least two candidates for CENI president: civil society leader Ben Sekou Syllah and an opposition party member, Mr. Boubacar Diallo who represents the Union Force Democratic Guinean (UFDG) party. While the secretary general at the Ministry of Interior and Security told poloff in the past that the CENI leaders must be decided by consensus, commission members (including from the UFDG and from civil society) told poloff that a simple majority is all that is necessary.

19. (SBU) Once the CENI establishes its leadership and gets settled, its first task will be to develop a realistic timeline for elections preparations and decide a final election date. In addition, now that the national commission is in place, independent commissions will be established throughout the country at the regional, prefectural and sous-prefectural levels.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Conte's signing of the CENI decree has generated significant enthusiasm and optimism among Guineans who are hoping for credible, transparent elections in the first half of 2008. The first test of this new CENI will be to see how - and how quickly - members establish the commission's internal leadership. A wide range of contacts believe that the only acceptable candidate to lead the CENI is Ben Sekou Syllah, representing civil society. However, contacts within the UFDG party have told poloff that Ben Syllah is considered "too close" to Union Force Republican (UPR) party leader Sidya Toure and that they will not support his leadership.

¶11. A number of contacts, including election observers in the international donor community, are optimistic that the question of CENI leadership will be decided in a matter of days. However, the fact that it took nearly three months for political parties to agree on their internal CENI candidate lists suggests that the decision may take longer than expected. Furthermore, while some think Ben Syllah's election is a foregone conclusion, he faces significant opposition. Ben Syllah might be the logical choice for CENI president, but it may take some time for competing factions to come to that decision - or they could decide on someone else. There is likely to be a number of behind the scenes deals as different groups maneuver to make sure they are represented somewhere within the CENI's executive bureau. The CENI cannot move forward as a functioning body until it organizes internally and the end result of that process may not be as evident as many observers believe. END COMMENT.

CARTER